

Chapter Three

Encounter His Presence

Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of My servant Moses: he is faithful in all My house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (Numbers 12:8)

Keen lovers of C.S. Lewis' children's stories might be tempted to lament the reference to there being 'few connecting doors left' between our world and the magical land of Narnia.

The door that really matters, however – between heaven and earth – in no way closed when the Lord Jesus ascended back to His Father. Although He would no longer be able to walk and talk with His disciples in quite the same way, He promised that He would continue to communicate with them by His Spirit.

Thousands or years before the Spirit was poured out on all flesh, the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud in the wilderness to rebuke Aaron and Miriam for their critical attitude. The passage quoted above shows how highly the Lord rated Moses. In the process it also reveals at least three different levels of communication. First come face-to-face encounters, then visions and dreams, and finally riddles.¹

We could perhaps liken these 'direct' and 'indirect' means of communication to soccer referees awarding direct and indirect free kicks. In the case of direct free kicks, players have the change to drive the ball through the defensive wall and into the net. If the free kick is an indirect one, the ball has to be passed to someone else before a shot can be attempted.

I love reading accounts of people who have had 'face-to-face' encounters. Extraordinary things always seem to happen to them. Even better if we are able to spend time with them – we are more than likely to 'catch' something of their anointing and authority!

My mind goes back to the godly Building Society manager the Lord told us to approach for our first mortgage application. He turned out to be a man who walked so closely to the Lord that you could feel the presence of heaven all around as he prayed.

The Lord told him to go ahead with a transaction that many another manager would have balked at: to trust a person who lived 'by faith' to meet his monthly repayments. When we consider all that has developed as the direct result of owning our first property, we can only marvel at how significant that word proved to be.

Many years ago, Ros and I spent a few hours with John and Paula Sandford, whose books are making such a profound impact on many. As we prayed together, we could feel the Lord's presence 'layers deep' in the room, even before they brought a powerful word that launched us into another phase of our ministry.

Face to face

Show me Your face, let me hear Your voice; for Your voice is sweet, and Your face is lovely. (Song of Songs 2:14)

The veil between heaven and earth is very thin. One evening in Paris in the mid 1970's, I returned home to my lodgings from a midweek Bible study feeling unusually deflated.

For reasons I can no longer recall, my contributions had not been well received. I flopped down onto my knees and poured out my heart to God. Suddenly, I found myself praying an outrageous prayer: that I might be allowed to go to heaven that night. It was not so much that I went to heaven as that heaven came to me. My prayer was abundantly answered as the presence of the Lord flooded into the room. I was utterly *known* in a totally different way to anything I had ever experienced before.

We conversed together in all for three hours. First of all, He called me to be His witness. In the warmth of the Lord's immediate presence, it is easy to hear 'hard' truths. Amongst many pointers to the future, He told me that He did not want me to marry the girl I was engaged to. I had been feeling uneasy about the relationship for some time, but had been reluctant to make the break. Now the Lord was insisting on it.

He also stressed that I should not become a vicar – something that kept me from confusion when people made inevitable suggestions that I 'do it properly and get ordained.'

Towards the end of our time together, the Lord told me that although I would not meet Him again in quite such a dramatic way this side of heaven, His presence would always be with me. When I asked Him how I could be sure in the future that I had not imagined this face-to-face encounter He instructed me to read a passage from Deuteronomy 5:24: '*This day we have seen that a man can live, even if God speaks with him.*'

The Lord eased the pain of losing this intense awareness of heaven by pouring out His Spirit on me, and giving me a gift I had been praying for: the ability to speak in tongues. For several more weeks His presence remained close, allowing me to remain as it were on the heavenward side. This was my 'Mount of Transfiguration' experience, that equipped and strengthened me for all that lay ahead.

For Reflection and Prayer

We do not have to search far in the Bible to find examples of face-to-face encounters, from the Lord calling Abraham and directing Moses, right through to the Lord Jesus speaking to John on the island of Patmos, where He bequeathed the Church with important insights and end-time scenarios.

Most commonly, the Lord grants these experiences in order to heal, guide, reassure or warn. Ponder examples of face-to-face encounters that you have read about or come across. Pray for God to meet with more and more people in such ways – as in the story below.

God speaks a healing centre into being

A certain unbeliever was sitting in his office in Cornwall doing his tax returns when he suddenly found himself writing across the form, ‘You shall know my thoughts!’ The man, a down to earth Cockney, was pondering what this could mean when an angel appeared in the bay window in a pillar of light.

The angel told him that the Lord wanted to use his house as a Christian healing centre. As a result of this encounter, the man began attending the local church, and asked the Lord Jesus into his life. His house, *Hephzibah*, became a healing center, and he himself went on to exercise such a powerful healing ministry that the Church of England commissioned him into the ministry of healing.

A woman saw an advertisement for the work of this ministry at a time when her son had severe health problems. When introduced, this man was miraculously healed, and later went on to acquire the property when the original owner died. The ministry and vision of *Hephzibah* continue to this day in Cornwall.²

Of such tales there is no end. It is no part of our brief to second-guess God’s sovereign workings. ‘Why were *these* men chosen for such miraculous experiences?’ is not the sort of question that will aid our seeking. What will help is the willingness to turn all our energies – our hopes, our dreams, into a fervent quest to love and serve the Lord.

Back in the thirteenth century, the stunningly beautiful Margaret of Cortona spent nine years as the mistress of an Italian ‘cavalier.’ Outwardly she put on a brazen face, but inwardly she was filled with much disquiet. Her world fell apart altogether when her lover was suddenly assassinated. Distraught beyond words, and laying the blame for this tragic event on herself for having transgressed God’s command, she resolved to live henceforth only for the glory of the Lord.

As prodigals are ever wont to do, her first impulse was to return to the perceived security of her family home. She was unable to find the space and grace there, however, that she so desperately needed. (Her father and profoundly uncaring stepmother showed her firmly to the door.) What followed is an illustration of the Biblical promise that ;*Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.*³

Sitting beneath a fig tree in total desolation, a host of demons flocked around Margaret, eager to reassure her that she would have no difficulty in finding suitable men to care for her, because she was so beautiful. Above and beyond the deluge of temptation, the Still Small Voice spoke, bidding her to put herself under the care of the Franciscan friars.

Margaret found with the friars the ‘parental’ support that was so sorely wanting in her natural home. She went on to live a life of exemplary humility. The example may appear extreme, but in our own way many of us can identify with the call to repentance and humility that Margaret lived out, and that Suzanne Pillans spoke of in the opening chapter.

As we have seen, these are the qualities that enable us to withstand the flood tide of Satan’s condemnation, and to make an impact for the Lord, without allowing any trace of the attendant glory to lodge in our soul.

Such people, and only such as have yielded themselves completely to the Lord, often experience a special sense of sweetness in their soul as the Spirit draws them near to the One they love. His presence compensates for the troubles they almost invariably also go through, just as His power removes the obstacles in their path.

For Reflection and Prayer

‘How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?’ (Jesus in John 5:44)

Souls are tested by praise they receive – but they are tested still more stringently when the light of Christ in them is misconstrued by others. Just as many well-intentioned people doubted the Lord Jesus, so there will always be those who misunderstand both our methods and our motives. What a temptation we feel at such times to try to vindicate ourselves.

It is often the most godly who agonize longest over their motivation. The less scrupulous are far too convinced of their own rightness to entertain such hesitations.

We are wise to consider carefully the possibility that we may be mistaken – yet we must not hold back when God has spoken. Since we offer the devil unlimited landing strips for fear and doubt, we should pray the following prayer as often as we need to.

*Free us, Lord from the fear of man!
Make us resolute and incisive when You have spoken,
For this leaves no room for the Doubter to work.*

Dreams that heal and seal

Then God said to him in the dream . . . (Genesis 20:6)

If face-to-face encounters are relatively rare occurrences the Lord speaks to us far more frequently at one stage removed by means of dreams, visions and other signs and pointers. These often non-verbal communications get us thinking and moving in a particular direction, but usually require further prayer before we can be sure what the Lord is saying or doing.

To any who may be skeptically minded on the subject of dreams, let me stress how often He does so in the Bible.⁴ Every year more and more people in Islamic countries are coming to know the Lord Jesus as a result of receiving dreams about Him.

There is nothing new about this. Back in the fifth century, pirates sailed up the River Clyde and seized a young boy called Patrick. Seven grim years of slavery in Ireland ensued. It was during this time that the Lord drew him back to the faith of his fathers, and set him on fire with love for Himself.

One night, Patrick had a dream, in which he saw how he could cross the country and find a boat. The fact that the Lord had spoken did not mean that things would work out easily. It was only with extreme difficulty that Patrick persuaded the ship's captain to take him on board.

The Lord's purposes for Patrick in the land of his captivity did not come to an end with his escape to France. Some years later, he heard the voice of the Irish people calling him to return. What the Lord began through a rescue dream He continued with this commissioning vision.

Patrick's lifelong mission brought whole tribes to faith, making Ireland a leading Christian nation. In his footsteps, Columba went to Iona, the first of multitude of Irish Celtic missionaries who set out to evangelize Scotland and the northern islands. Later, from the island outpost of Lindisfarne, they touched almost every part of northern and western Europe by their missionary zeal.

It is sobering to think that this crucial work might never have developed had Patrick dug in his heels and said, 'I don't do countries that treat me badly.' Mercifully, like Paul, he was obedient to the heavenly vision.

Most of our dreams do not lead to such high-powered consequences, of course. They are more like broad strokes of the Father's brush, of which just a few insights and features stand out to direct us towards some particular person, project or understanding. Because our memories are fickle, we are wise if we record the details of dreams we believe may be of spiritual significance as soon as possible after the event.

Shortly after I became a Christian, I began to pray for an old school friend. My clumsy attempts to tell her about the Lord met with no response, and for the next twelve years, I had no further contact with her. One night, however, I saw her in a dream as a Christian.

To my astonishment I received a letter from her the very next day. Not only had she given her life to the Lord, she had already helped a couple of other people in her village to do the same. I had felt led to pray for one person, but the Lord was already thinking of all the people He would bring to Himself through her!

Dreams often supply a vital *portion* of the guidance we need, but they usually require further clarification before we should accept them as definitive guidance. As I came to the end of seven exciting years in Oxford, I knew the Lord was calling me to resign my post as an evangelist and move on, but I had no idea where He wanted me to go. When I had a dream of black and white houses, however, or some reason I felt convinced that the Lord was speaking about Chester.

The following night, as I was going to sleep, the Lord whispered to me the names of two churches. I happened to be in the region a few weeks later, so I popped in to Chester to pursue the matter. The churches did indeed turn out to exist. They became fruitful bases for the next eight years – but only after the leaders of the principal church confirmed the dream and welcomed me into the leadership.

Beyond these broad brush strokes lie finer ones that focus our attention on particular issues. For example, we may do our best to bury certain memories, but our subconscious is not so easily fooled.⁵ Whilst many things *should* be forgotten, we should be particularly alert to themes and symbols that recur regularly in our dreams. The Lord uses them as a discreet way to show us when something is out of balance in our lives.

Other dreams are more like X-rated Gothic films in which the Lord allows us disturbing glimpses into the strategies of hell. Rather than accepting these dire predictions, it is helpful to realize that they are, effectively, a call to pray for the very *opposite* of what we have seen to come about. In other words, the Lord uses our prayers to thwart what the powers of darkness are planning.

One step down from these ‘alarm bells’ lie dreams that are two parts psychological for one part spiritual. Suppose, for example, that you are organizing a conference, and dream of an empty auditorium. The chances are that this is just the subconscious having a wobble. There again, it may also be the Lord alerting us to the fact that the conference will only fulfill the Lord’s objectives if we pray a whole lot harder.

Likewise, we should not be in a hurry to change our ticket if we dream that the plane we are about to catch is going to crash. If such radical action really is required, the Lord will confirm it in other ways. In the meantime, *use* the dream as stimulus to pray. May the conference we are planning be well attended and successful – and the journey we are going on be both safe and greatly blessed!

For Reflection and Prayer
Father, please speak to us clearly in our dream life.
Help us to harness the pointers that You give –
And to discard irrelevant details.

Visions that inform and direct

Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint.
(Proverbs 29:18)

In the verse above, the word *hazon* (often translated ‘vision’) speaks of direct communication from God to a prophetic people, rather than about people setting their own goals.

One night as I was falling asleep, I saw a girl of student age crying out, ‘Lord, I’m so lonely.’ I woke up and asked the Lord for details. He supplied me with the address. We went to visit the house the next day, but it was deserted. When we knocked on the door of the neighbouring flat – there was the young lady in question, just as I had seen her in the vision – lonely, and ready to hear about the Lord Jesus.

Because our minds are fully conscious when we receive visions from God, there is usually less subliminal clutter to file out than is the case with dreams. Whether the emphasis is on words, (which we normally associate with ‘prophecy’) or on pictures (‘visions’) there is no limit to what the Lord may choose to speak about.

Visions can range from fleeting impressions and steering touches on the screen of our minds to the full-scale trance that Peter experienced on the rooftop – a vision the Lord used to open his eyes to His desire to reach the Gentile world.⁶

What we need then is a different set of skills to know what to do with what the Lord is showing us. Sometimes it is wisest to keep the matter between God and ourselves in prayer until we are sure we know what to do next.

On other occasions we must seize the moment and share what He has given us straight away. Never be afraid to share what the Lord gives you, just because it does not make much sense at the time. The larger picture might be incomplete without your contribution!

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, we are so grateful for the many times
When You have given people ‘living words’
And they have had the courage to pass them on.
(Pause and remember such examples)
Make us open first to hear Your Still Small Voice –
And then to know what to do
With the words and visions that You give.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Heed God's love nudges

I want to celebrate the way the Still Small Voice impacts the human soul. Words that turn out to be pivotal often originate in gentle whispers that come unheralded, before crystallizing into powerful words that echo across sea and land as if amplified by a megaphone.

When crosswinds blow, the words often appear to fade from view, yet somehow, like frail saplings, they survive the storm and emerge to fulfill all the Lord had in mind.

God speaks not only because He wants us to know what is going on, but because He wants to know what is going on, but because He has already planned solutions for the dilemmas that we face. Call them 'nudges,' 'words of knowledge,' or 'prophecies' – may we be constantly open for the Holy Spirit to sharpen our ability to know things we could not be aware of without His direct impartation.

I am sure you can testify to many occasions when the Lord's promptings has opened doors and saved you much time and expense. Moreover, following one of God's 'love nudges' often leads to other doors opening.

There are two key principles to bear in mind: 'Consult before Acting' and 'Obedience preceded Understanding.'

I think of a man who was well into his seventies when the Lord called him to serve the Church behind the Iron Curtain. As he approached a border checkpoint on one of his trips, carrying urgently needed supplies, the Lord told him to move a package from its hiding place, and to put it somewhere else. When the border guards came into his can, the only place they checked was the place where the package had been.

It reminds me of how the Lord showed Elisha in great detail what the king of Aram was planning to do to Israel. The information was put to such good use that the king was forced to conclude he must have a traitor in his midst.⁷

We are not psychic if we hear such things: we are simply in touch with the Lord who loves to speak to His children. It is not only about matters of state, therefore, or when someone is going astray, that the Lord speaks.

On a recent trip to London, I was delighted to find lunch waiting on the table when I arrived at my hostess's house. 'The Lord told me to have it ready for you,' she explained. 'He said that you are diabetic.' I was doubly grateful: for the food itself – and for the reassurance that the Lord knows my need to eat regularly.

I can think of various occasions when we have arrived on people's doorsteps having felt a clear check *against* telephoning them first to see if they were free. Since the people only returned home minutes before we arrived, we would have assumed that they were out –

and something precious or important would have been missed. (This is not to make a ‘doctrine’ out of not phoning before visiting. It is normally only courteous to do so.)

Likewise, when we were staying with some friends on holiday, we had more or less promised to take them out for a meal one evening, when the Lord told me to stay in instead. At the risk of appearing stingy we stayed put, only to have a most useful time with someone who dropped by later that evening.

If we do not act on some nudges immediately, the opportunity passes by and is gone forever. If we pluck up courage and reach out to the people the Lord directs us to, be sure to make a note of their names and addresses. God can alert us at any time then if He wants us to get in touch with them again.

Occasionally, something is sufficiently important that He will give us a second chance. As a young Christian, I was walking down the Metro one day in Paris when He told me to go up and witness to a beggar lady. I resisted, arguing that it would make me late for church! (We can be very devious sometimes in justifying our disobedience!) As I put my ticket through the barrier, however, it refused to work.

The Lord had been teaching me a lot about how He is often saying something through these sorts of things. Instead of pausing to inquire, however, I went and bought another ticket.

This time it did work, but when the train stopped at the next station the Lord caught up with me – and there was no mistaking the displeasure in His voice. ‘I told you to go and do it!’ I made my way back and found the woman still there, crying out for somebody to come and talk to her. I had learned a valuable, if not altogether comfortable, lesson concerning the sovereignty of the Lord.

For Reflection and Prayer

Never underestimate what God can accomplish through even the briefest word. One day, a famous guru was startled to hear the Lord say to him, ‘You are not God!’ This simple but far-reaching word began the process that led first to his conversion and then to a wide-ranging ministry, alerting young Westerners to the perils of eastern meditation techniques, and to the parallels between them and certain mind-altering drugs.⁸

Seed nudges that lead to long term fruit

On my return to England, I was walking briskly up the High Street one evening, on my way to preach for the first time at a particular church when the Lord told me distinctly to go back and look at my car. It sounded an odd thing to do. I protested that I did not want to be late for the meeting, but the Lord repeated the instruction, so I went back to look at it. Clouds of acrid smoke were billowing into the car through the heating ducts!

Feeling decidedly foolish, I asked the driver of a car that had just pulled up, 'Excuse me, are you as expert at putting out car fires?' To my astonishment, he replied that he was! Taking out a fire extinguisher he promptly saved my vehicle. Was he, perhaps an angel?

On a recent trip to Dresden, I scheduled an extra day at the end, really just to give the Lord the chance to do the unexpected. After completing my ministry assignments, I heard that the Christian classical musicians in Weimar were meeting on that day, three hours' drive away. Because I had spoken at their inaugural weekend, five years previously, it felt more right to go there than to spend the time with friends in Dresden.

As soon as I arrived, I was introduced to a Canadian opera singer. '*What* did you say your name was?' she exclaimed. To our mutual delight, she turned out to be someone I had led to the Lord twenty-seven years ago in Paris. I had long since lost touch with her – but she had been praying that our paths would cross again!

The years rolled back as we made up for lost time. One October Saturday, when I was spending a year abroad as part of my French degree, I had planned to attend a conference in Paris. For the first and only time in its honorable career, however, my alarm clock failed to go off. By the time I woke up it was too late to bother going, so I decided to pay a visit to a (supposedly retired) vicar, whose name I had been given before going to France. I had no idea that he was pasturing a thriving church, and was most surprised to find him leading an afternoon fellowship meeting.

The vicar invited me to share my testimony. A young Canadian au pair approached me at the end of the meeting, asking me to pray with her to receive the Lord Jesus into her heart. And here she was, all these years later, still going strong in the Lord!

Paris holds a special place in my heart. I returned for a brief visit a year or two later and spoke at an evening fellowship meeting. On the following morning, I felt a nudge to visit an outstanding musician who had participated in the meeting. I trekked across the city, only to find that she was out. I dithered at her door, before shoving a note under her door: 'If ever you are back in the UK, this is my address.'

Three years passed without a word, and then, out of the blue, I heard from her. By now, she was on the committee of the Musicians' Christian Fellowship, and had been praying about whom to invite as speaker for their annual conference. The Lord impressed on her that she should invite the person who had cared enough to visit her on that occasion three years before, when she had been out.

I wrote back saying that I would have been delighted to accept, but unfortunately had a prior commitment. The following day brought news that I was no longer needed for the other event. I was free to be with the musicians!

I love telling this story, because it illustrates that when God has a purpose in mind, He is both resourceful and determined in bringing it about. I had kicked my self for getting my

guidance so badly wrong that day back in Paris – but God knew all along what He intended to bring about through this briefest of contacts.

Many precious friendships and opportunities emerge as the result of that conference, particularly in terms of developing the blend of worship and intercession which we have found to be such an effective way of seeking the Lord for wider issues. Effectively, it marked the beginning of an entirely new phase of our ministry.

I wish I could say I always obeyed the Lord's nudges so successfully. There have been other occasions when I have been far too slow in responding to what God tells me to do.

I came home from church some months ago tired, but aware of a prompting to give someone a ring. 'I'm sure it can wait,' I rationalized and sat down to watch TV. A few minutes later, I had a blazing row with my son – over the matter of what we were watching!

I will never know how urgently the other person needed me to contact them that night, but at least I would have been out of harm's way, and a most unfortunate confrontation would have been avoided.

For Reflection and Prayer

The Lord always has a reason for speaking to us. Take some time out to consider specific ways the Lord has spoken to you. What fruit has there been as a result?

*Line my heart up, Lord, to receive more of Your nudges,
and to be quicker to obey them.*

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Answers that pose further questions

Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. (Isaiah 50:10)

Much of our hearing comes when we ask God questions. It sometimes feels, however, as though He answers our questions at a tangent – or even sidesteps them altogether.

When Jesus told His country-dwelling disciples that not one stone of Herod's great Temple would be left on top of each other, the disciples were puzzled and asked Him what He meant.⁹ Jesus embarked instead on a wide-ranging overview of the end times. This was no politician ducking an awkward question: this was the Lord introducing His future leaders to themes that would be crucial for the Body of Christ to grapple with throughout the generations to come.

Remember how your math teachers used to insist that the working out was as important as the answer? Long ago, in the golden age of Greek philosophy, Socrates recognized that

people learn best by finding out things for themselves. The ‘Socratic’ style of teaching asks questions in such a way as to help people see truth for themselves.

In the course of his intense suffering, Job asked God many hard questions. The Lord wasted no time justifying Himself, but when He ‘shows up’ at the end of the book, He asked Job a harder set of questions. I find it particularly striking how many times He refers to animals that can be of no possible use to mankind – indeed, which are often hostile to us.

It is as though the Lord was saying through the questions He asked, ‘Look Job, I made these creatures. You cannot tame or harness them. You know next to nothing about them, but they still have their place in My overall scheme of things.’¹⁰

The Lord often chooses to draw out our understanding rather than telling us too quickly or too directly how to proceed or what to believe – just as He asked Philip a seemingly impossible question in John 6:5-6 in order to test him.

For Reflection and Prayer

There is a real need to search out ways of teaching that draw out people’s understanding.¹¹ When we feel as though circumstances are crowding and besetting us on all sides, by all means seek the Lord as to what is going on. He loves it when we ask Him questions – but may they stem more from a desire to be prophetic than from anxiety or fretfulness. Be prepared, too, for Him to ask some in return!

*Lord, help me not to become discouraged
when You appear to be slow – reluctant even –
to give straightforward answers.
Thank You that You know exactly what steps to take,
and the right order in which to do them.
Teach me to trust Your character,
even when I cannot discern Your leading.*

Understanding ‘Dark Speech’

A wise man hears and will increase learning, and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels; to understand a proverb and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their dark sayings. (Proverbs 1:5-6)¹²

‘Tell me a story!’ This is the cry of children all over the world. Jesus did not come to provide people with the scientific formulae by which His Father created the universe. He came to call sinners to repentance, to heal the sick, to restore the broken hearted . . . and to tell stories. What better medium can there be for conveying truth?

Zefirelli’s production of *Jesus of Nazareth* made such an impression on me because of the way he portrayed Jesus telling His parables. These well known stories integrate

precious truths about the reality of the heavenly Kingdom with the world his hearers were entirely familiar with. Through them, Jesus showed His Father's concern for everything that is lost: coins, son and sheep alike. In the process, He opened up a parallel new world to His hearers.

Simply telling them the eternal 'facts of the matter,' for example in a series of theological statements, could never have had the same impact.

Jesus taught the crowds about the Kingdom of Heaven almost exclusively by means of parables, but He explained their meaning afterwards to His disciples. Privately. Parables were thus both a helpful teaching aid and a fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy: 'I will open My mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from old.'¹³

A parable talks about one subject (such as fish, or a lost sheep) but its real meaning lies elsewhere. We need the key that enables us to understand this type of teaching.

Did you wonder what the reference to 'riddles' in Numbers 12:8 had to do with discerning the Still Small Voice? More, perhaps, than we might imagine. John and Paula Sandford do a splendid job in their books of making sense of the less direct ways in which God speaks to us, which they call 'dark speech,' or 'dark sayings.'¹⁴

At its simplest, dark speech occurs when we think God is saying one thing to us, only to find out later that He was actually speaking about something rather different. You may well have experienced this already – for example if you felt the Lord telling you to go and visit someone, only to find that they were out. Because you were on the move, you were in the right place to meet someone else. It is clear in retrospect that this was what the Lord intended all along, but it can be puzzling at the time.

Similarly, the Lord does not always rebuke us openly, but allows circumstances to work out in such a way as to bring us to a clearer understanding of a situation, and hence to our need of repentance. The more alert our spirits are, the quicker we will be at picking up on the 'double entendres' the Lord 'encodes' in the words that people (usually quite unwittingly) say to us. He also uses the hard lessons we learn, when we fail to think through consequences ahead of time, and insist on driving through red lights.

Intelligence work consists of painstakingly assembling apparently unrelated pieces of information, rather than of the shoot-outs beloved by the movie makers. We likewise will often have to 'unravel' the different pointers God gives us, in order to make sense of what He is saying. They are pieces of a jigsaw and pointers in a treasure hunt rather than full-page printouts of 'answers from heaven.'

The Hebrew word *chidah* – 'dark speech' or 'dark saying' – literally means a 'knot.' There is nothing second best about indirect speech; it is simply part of the way by which the Lord keeps us humble and dependent. If we knew too much in advance, or could always be sure of hearing correctly, pride would puff us up and lead us astray.

In all this, the Lord wants us to become partners with Him through the discoveries we make on the way. He points our thoughts and prayers in a certain direction, and then looks for us to act on what He is showing us.

Sometimes we strive too hard to find a literal interpretation for some vision or dream we have received when it is the general thrust of the revelation that matters, rather than the specific details. When God gave Paul a vision of a Macedonian man calling to him across the water, it could be argued that the ‘man’ was actually Lydia! The important thing is that the mission changed direction and headed for Macedonia.¹⁵

At other times we can become too fixed on what we (mistakenly) believe the Lord has said. A friend rang a couple of months ago, utterly preoccupied with a long-standing feeling that the Lord wanted her to marry a particular man. So far as I could tell, his interest in her appeared to have waned past any reasonable hope of recovery. The impression I had was that she was desperately trying to find some way through the maze to reach the prize of marriage.

Children’s puzzles – such as ‘Help the frog find its way through the maze to the pond’ – are often easier to solve if you start at the opposite end and work your way backwards. I tried doing the same by looking at this from a different angle, urging her to consider not whether God was saying it but what it would be like actually to be *married* to him. She had to admit that on both past and present form, he would *not* be the kind and compassionate person that she needed.

The spell began to unravel. Two months on, she feels free and ‘clear’ again.

For Reflection and Prayer
Lord, help us to follow the threads of Your leading
until You pull the strands together
and the fuller picture comes into focus.

The gift of Tongues

I would have you all speak with tongues. (1 Corinthians 14:5)

The gift of tongues is itself a form of dark speech. We use it to build ourselves up without knowing precisely which mysteries we are proclaiming, or who we are praying for. Let us not take this precious gift for granted!¹⁶

I have known at least three occasions when a tongues has been given in a recognizable language. On several occasions the Lord gave me a series of revelations in a dialect of Farsi, which an Iranian friend was able to translate.

This provided powerful and important confirmation concerning the message the Lord had given me, to share with the wider Body of Christ concerning the grief and anger in God’s

heart at the way the Church is allowing trivia and syncretism to blunt our cutting edge.¹⁷ As a result, our nations are wide open to many opposing and dangerous spiritual forces. We shall be exploring this message in more detail in the sequel to this volume, *Led by the Spirit*.

On the second occasion, when my daughter was eleven, she prayed for someone in Tanzania, who received a special gift – the ability to speak in English! I shall be referring on page one hundred to the occasion when a friend prayed in an exquisitely beautiful medieval language, and brought precious insights concerning our sojourn in Shetland.

For Reflection and Prayer

Thank You, Lord, for the gift of tongues! May it be used to Your glory. Jackie Pullinger, who has helped so many to receive the gift, recommends that we spend no less than fifteen minutes each day praying in this way, because it helps to release the power and authority of God into our lives.

Myths and symbols

I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him. (John 1:32)

Long before I consciously opened my heart to the Lord Jesus, I experienced a strong sense of His presence ‘knocking on the door of my heart’ every time Aslan made an appearance in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I still do so to this day. These wonderful stories ‘work’ as well for grown ups as for children.

We have seen that Jesus taught consistently through images. In our utilitarian world, C.S. Lewis reminds us of the power that myths and symbols have to portray the deepest aspects of truth. Many people today have become cut off from this way of learning – although the widespread popularity of symbol-laden fantasy games show that people are seeking to bridge this dimly perceived rift between head and heart.

May the Lord lead us to the reality of our missing symbols: of what it means to be a man, a woman, a family, a friend, a church, and so on.

As we bring as much of ourselves as we can to as much of God as we understand, may He bridge the gap and draw us to particular areas of service. Some will feel called to pray especially for the suffering church, others to take the gospel to remote tribes, still others to address areas of injustice. God may well use specific signs, symbols and pointers to confirm and develop these callings.

It is as unwise to go overboard on the matter of outward signs, as it is to ignore the possibility that the Lord may be speaking through them. People suffering from stiff necks are not automatically stubborn. The Lord spoke recently, however, that one person’s damaged spine and incapacitated legs were a sign that he was no longer fulfilling the

Lord's plan – which was to share the love of the Head (the Lord Jesus) with the Body (the Church). When he resumed his ministry, his physical problems greatly improved.

I recently invited a friend to be part of the worship group at an event that I knew would appeal to him. He was as surprised as we were when the Lord told him not to come. In the meantime, someone had a vision of him sitting in the middle of a floor strewn with sharp tacks. As he watched, some of the tacks were hammered into the floor, making it possible for him to get out of the room he was stuck in.

My friend could make nothing of the symbolism. He was not aware of any particular needs or problems in his life, but he did know that the Lord had been speaking to him for some time about sending him a partner – and nothing appeared to be happening in that direction.

Meanwhile the Lord had been preparing a beautiful and anointed widow on the other side of the world! By a remarkable series of leadings, she paid a visit to his community, and recognized him immediately as the one for whom she had been keeping herself pure these many years. Right until the evening before she was due to leave, however, (to her considerable frustration!) my friend continued to act with studious courtesy and extreme reserve.

God had done His bit in preparing the couple's hearts, and in making sure that he would not be out of town at the crucial moment – but he still had to do his part. In a rush of understanding, the vision of the pathway through the tacks returned to his mind.

Now it all made sense. Courage flooded in and he reached out to embrace the lovely lady God had brought into his life. Against the odds, visas were approved and they were free to be married.

For Reflection and Prayer

Experienced wireless operators can recognize people by their 'signature' as they transmit their messages.

Help us, Lord, to recognize the ways in which You use particular signs and symbols to communicate with us.

Midwifery Matters

Where is our listening to be worked out? Often, it will be in the place where we work. Many Christians fell guilty about their work, however, because they are not 'full time' for the Lord. It works the other way round, of course. Many Christian workers feel guilty because they are not doing a regular nine-to-five job. The devil does not miss a trick!

Spiritual distinctions are rarely as clear as I may have made it appear in this chapter. The boundaries between direct and indirect speech are by no means 'carved in stone;' they

weave in and out of each other, often hovering between the crystal clear and the highly fragmentary. In this section, in which I shall be giving the briefest of overviews of how the Lord developed Ros's calling as a midwife, we will see God speaking clearly about 'professional' matters.

As she came towards the end of her midwifery training, Rosalind applied for a job in Chester, where I was already living. We were married just two days after her final exams. Towards the end of our honeymoon, I felt a nudge to cut our holiday short. It was just a simple sense in my heart – no big deal, and therefore quite difficult to 'grade.'

Ros and I often play a grading game, whereby we express how clearly we think we have heard something. 'A' grade means 'Please take this seriously. I really think I have heard from the Lord, unless you feel that I'm mistaken.' 'C' or 'D' grade may mean nothing more than 'I have had this passing thought . . .'

There is nothing in the least infallible about this attempt to grade our nudges, but it does help us to convey how seriously we felt we need to take an issue.

Even though we had no 'second strand' to confirm this change of direction, we returned home three days ahead of schedule. There on the doormat was a letter, inviting Ros for an interview the following morning. In the light of the way the Lord subsequently developed her midwifery ministry, we can only marvel at the lengths He went to in order to bring us back in time for that interview. She turned out to be the last midwife from outside the county to be appointed for nearly a decade!

Two years later, Ros laid down her career to have our first-born. When Ruth was nearly a year old, however, the Lord tapped Ros on the shoulder and told her that He still had work for her to do as a midwife. At the same time, He asked me to support her fully in this venture.

From the moment Ros returned to work, it felt entirely different. Midwifery had now become a calling, rather than just a career. Many times she sensed the Lord's prompting to pray with mothers during labour, or just after they had given birth.

Women are more open to God when they experience the miracle of giving birth than perhaps they will ever be at any other moment in their lives – and they never forget 'the midwife who cared enough to pray with them.' On at least two occasions, Ros prayed for babies who had stopped breathing. Both began to breathe again, without any ill effects.

In the late 1980's the Lord led us to Shropshire. He confirmed that midwifery would be central to our calling, and when He gave us a house next door to a small maternity unit, we drew the obvious conclusion. We looked forward to Ros working there and maybe even coming home for lunch. Her application was rejected, however, because she was considered over qualified to work in the unit. In any case, they preferred to appoint people who had trained locally.

The Lord had given us His promise – and we needed the employment. The gap felt acute! It was at this critical juncture that the presence of the Lord came so powerfully on Ros that she literally shook. There and then He called her to set up as an independent midwife.

The Lord went to great lengths to open the door to make this calling a success. For over a decade she became the James Herriot of the midwifery world, with many a moonlit delivery up remote farm tracks. It brought her close to many families who were heavily involved in the New Age and occult, in a way that could never have happened by more conventional routes.¹⁸

On one occasion, Ros was attending a conference on the west coast of America, at which were present many lesbians and alternative practitioners. As one particular seminar progressed, ‘The Psychology of Fear on Childbirth,’ the atmosphere became heavier and heavier, as more and more horror stories were told of the devastating effects the litigation-driven culture is having on American midwives.

It was at this point that the Lord told Ros to take the microphone and release faith into the meeting. A prolonged argument ensued, which the Lord won by reminding her that within a few days she would be on a plane and heading back to the UK. Ros plucked up courage and did as the Lord had bidden her. Pandemonium broke out immediately (or was it a mini revival?) One lady shouted out, ‘Why does that woman refer to God as a man, propping up the male patriarchal system?’ She was subsequently counseled for salvation at the end of the evening. A prominent birth photographer also gave her heart to the Lord that day, and was disciplined for a year by one of the Christian midwives.

Several other midwives got to their feet and testified that the Lord was with them, and how their hands were His hands to welcome babies into the world. We continued to enjoy close relationships with American midwives for many years as the result of Ros having the courage to follow the Lord’s leading.

One of the morals we can draw from this episode is the need to keep pushing in prayer. Pray Until Something Happens!

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, You love to speak,
even without the need for words.
You listen to our inmost thoughts,
and draw our hearts to stillness.*

*Guard our hearing, Lord;
for listening is the gateway
to the intimate communion
that both we and You are longing for.*

*You taught us that the pure in heart are blessed,
for they will see God;
make our soul full of eyes
so that we can see and understand Your ways.*

*One word from You bestows direction
and kindles hope,
so never stop speaking to us.
Even if You have to say the same things
time and time again –*

*Even if it is not what we wanted to hear,
may we respond in faith and trust
until all that You purpose is accomplished.*

*As You show us where to go and what to do,
fill our hearts with a compassion
that mirrors Your own –
and may we take the beauty of Your presence
wherever we go.*

¹ Although no one can see the Lord's face, He promised that He would cause His goodness to pass in front of Moses. (Exodus 33:19-20)

² www.deeperwithgod.org

³ Psalm 27:10

⁴ For a few examples of significant dreams and visions, consider Genesis 15:1ff; 31:24; Acts 11:5ff, 16:9, 18:9; Ezekiel 1-3; 11:1-25; Matthew 1:20-21; Rev 1:1-2, cf Acts 2:17; 2 Cor 12:1

⁵ Elias Canetti wrote, 'All the things one has forgotten scream for help in dreams.' Freud wrote, 'The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind.' It is a shame he knew nothing about the workings of the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Acts 10. I love the way the angel tells Cornelius that his prayers and almsgiving have come up as a memorial to the Lord.

⁷ 2 Kings 5:25ff. Cf 2 Kings 6:10-12

⁸ Dave Hunt *Death of a Guru* (Hodder and Stoughton)

⁹ Mark 13:2

¹⁰ Job 38-42

¹¹ Eg Wolfgang Simson '*Houses that change the world – the return of the house churches.*' (Authentic Media). See especially pp. 215-217.

¹² Cf Psalm 49:3-4. The NKJV translates 'riddles' as 'dark sayings.'

¹³ Psalm 78:2

¹⁴ When Paul says, 'Now we see dimly, as in a mirror; but then we shall see face to face,' the word 'dimly' literally means 'in a riddle,' or 'in an enigma.' Cf Job 19:26-7; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 22:4; 1 Corinthians 13:12 RSV; Mark 4:33,34. Many 'mysteries' only make sense when we discover the Lord's perspective.

¹⁵ Acts 6:8-15

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:18, 39-40

¹⁷ Syncretism is the attempt to fuse different (and even opposing) beliefs and ideologies under one banner, thus effectively refuting Jesus' teaching that He is the only way to the Father. (John 14:6)

¹⁸ This might be a good opportunity to warn that involvement in occult links of any kind, whether deliberate or not, can lead to 'psychic' hearing rather than the authentic Still Small Voice. All such things need to be brought to the Cross, to die, before the life of the Spirit can flow. All sin and idolatry likewise clouds our hearing. Jack Deere looks at various other specific blockages in *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Kingsway), see especially chapters 16-18.